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Chernenko: Late bloomer, loyal party man

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From the day Konstantin U. Chernenko was named the top leader of the Soviet Union, his health — and thus his impact on Soviet and world affairs — was suspect.

His choice in early 1984 over younger rivals in the inner circle of the Communist Party seemed a signal that the Kremlin would be marking time, that the men who had matured in the Stalinist era were not yet ready to relinquish their hold to a younger generation.

Thus, with Chernenko's death Sunday at age 73, observers of Soviet affairs were watching closely to see if a younger man finally would be installed as general secretary of the Communist Party, the pinnacle of power in the Soviet Union.

The news of the death was broken yesterday in Moscow at 2 p.m. — 18 hours and 40 minutes after the fact — by a black-suited television news reader who in similar words had announced the deaths of Soviet leaders Leonid I. Brezhnev, at 75, on Nov. 19, 1982, and Yuri V. Andropov, at 69, on Feb. 9, 1984.

Four hours after Chernenko's death was reported, the official news agency Tass announced that Mikhail S. Gorbachov, 54, the Politburo's youngest member, had been unanimously elected general secretary at an extraordinary plenary session of the party Central Committee.

Came to power at 72

Chernenko was 72 when he was chosen to succeed Andropov, making him the oldest man ever named to the Soviets' top post.

A heavyset man with bushy white hair, jowly cheeks and a ruddy complexion, he was a classic late-bloomer, attaining power at an advanced age. To Western observers, his ascent seemed a triumph of longevity and good connections rather than the fruits of ambition and drive.

Despite his long career, little was known about him in the West when he was chosen to lead the Soviets. Malcolm Toon, a former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, recalled one meeting with him. Chernenko, he said, had struck him as a "dullard."

Indeed, it was not until 1975, when Chernenko was a highly visible aide to Brezhnev at the Helsinki summit on security and cooperation in Europe that his closeness to Brezhnev, to whom he owed his rise in the Communist Party, was realized in the West.

Named party chief on Feb. 13, 1984, Chernenko soon acquired the two other posts that indicate true power in the Soviets' inner circle of the Politburo. Within a few weeks, he became head of the Soviet Defense Council, which controls the Soviet armed forces. And in April, he was elected president of the Supreme Soviet, or parliament.

In domestic matters, he appeared to continue Andropov's initiatives to stamp out corruption and to introduce some incentives in the economic system. But there was little of the sense of urgency that Western observers saw developing under Andropov, who had appeared ready to shake up the party bureaucracy in order to revive the stagnant economy.

Accord in Geneva

In foreign affairs, undoubtedly the major development during Chernenko's term was the understanding reached in Geneva in early January to resume high-level talks with the United States on the limitation of nuclear weaponry. No talks had been held since the last round collapsed in late 1983, after U.S. allies in Europe began deploying medium-range missiles to offset a missile buildup in Eastern Europe.

Chernenko's health problems were apparent from the day he took power. American doctors, analyzing Chernenko's voice and appearance for the CIA, concluded that he had emphysema.

According to a Soviet medical bulletin released yesterday, the CIA doctors were right. But besides having emphysema, Chernenko suffered from heart problems and chronic hepatitis that worsened into cirrhosis, or deterioration, of his liver, according to the bulletin.

At Andropov's funeral, Chernenko's voice faltered for lack of breath as he hailed Andropov, the former head of the Soviet secret police, as "a glorious son of the Communist Party." And as Andropov's coffin was lowered into a tomb at the foot of the Kremlin wall, Chernenko, already named as Andropov's successor, seemed unable to hold up his arm in a sustained farewell salute.

Chernenko's speeches suffered for his chronic shortness of breath, and he sat down to rest three times while reviewing the annual May Day parade of Soviet military might. Later in the summer, he was not seen pub-

licly for seven weeks.

On Dec. 24, Chernenko failed to appear at the funeral of Defense Minister Dmitri F. Ustinov. Observers concluded that he had stayed away because of the day's extreme cold.

In early January, Kremlin officials acknowledged to Western diplomats that Chernenko was ill, though they would not elaborate.

When he failed to appear to make a campaign speech on Feb. 22, a few days before elections for the Supreme Soviet, even the pretense that he was not seriously ill was dropped.

Although he reappeared in two brief television clips on Feb. 24 and 28, he appeared physically feeble and mentally distracted. Less than two weeks later, he was dead.

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